

The Fenman **EXTRA**

Newsletter of the Fen Line Users Association

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In 1949 an early morning King's Lynn-London train and return afternoon working were named *The Fenman*: a bright light in the post-war austerity. The name has been used, both officially and not so, ever since.

FLUA thinks *The Fenman* name symbolises the Fen Line and, well over fifty years on, is pleased to say that unit no **365518** is now named **The Fenman** in memory of a former vice-chairman, the late **David Forgan**.

FLUA was formed at a meeting in King's Lynn on 23 November 1985, when the new Association brought together three existing strands. First, a bunch of regular King's Lynn and Downham Market commuters, banding together under **Rodney Collins**, FLUA's first Chairman. Secondly, the West Norfolk Public Transport Users Association, run by **Clara Zilahi**. And thirdly, a vigorous nationwide drive, led by **Trevor Garrod** of the Railway Development Society, to encourage the setting up of local rail user groups.

Early membership records are rather sketchy but we know that those members who have been with us since 1985 include **Mike Beckett, Ken Bizon, Keith Hinde, John Legg, Chris Milnes, Polly Perkins, Steve Smithson, Mark Steele** and **Clara Zilahi**.

But history is rarely simple - there was also a fourth group, a band of highly active and organized Waterbeach commuters, fronted by **Peter Harding** and **Robert Stripe**. Though Waterbeach didn't officially come under FLUA's ambit until April 1986, their campaigning efforts had started as far back as 1982.

Peter went on to become FLUA's Secretary from December 1992 until late 2000, when he moved away from the area. He is a very supportive member and a good friend of FLUA.

Steve Smithson took over as Treasurer in February 1998 and ably covered both finance and membership matters. Not only that, but he also stepped into the breach when **Peter** moved and he became FLUA's Acting Secretary for most of 2000/1.

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John Legg had been a strong FLUA Chairman for five fruitful years when he stood down at the October 1993 AGM. "He'll be a hard act to follow," said his successor as Chairman, **Robert Stripe**.

For *twelve* years after that **Robert** kept us on the straight and narrow and became synonymous with the Fen Line, seemingly wherever you go! Indeed, Waterbeach has long been regarded as the seat of the Fen Line embassy, its mission to improve the lot of passengers from each and every station.

Hard act to follow for our new Chairman? Colin's a fan of the old Great Central Railway; its motto, "Forward"! Says it all really.

The Fenman EXTRA goes to members and to selected people in the rail industry. It is not on display at stations.



21 years
of results

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Assurance, doubly sure

LET'S BE TOTALLY CLEAR about this. The singling of two sections north of Littleport did *not* come about as a result of economies made for electrification.

It is hard to be absolutely precise as to when electrification north of Cambridge was first seriously mooted. After all, the BR Modernisation Plan of 1955 envisaged the wires stretching all the way to Hunstanton!

Fascinating to say, there were London commuters from that seaside resort as early as 1901. The 07.45 called at the Royal station of Wolferton (and at Snettisham and North Wootton for London passengers *only*), before reversing at Lynn, its portions arriving at St. Pancras at 11.17 and Liverpool Street at 11.19. Return times were at 17.05 and 17.15 respectively - only for the very rich who could afford to keep gentleman's hours.

Digression? True, but note this long-distance commuting was encouraged by the provision of a high class restaurant car, and the through service eventually (though not until 1949) evolved into the Hunstanton - Lynn - Ely - Cambridge - London express, *The Fenman*.

And, yes, electrification all the way to Hunstanton was envisaged under the 1955 BR Modernisation Plan. But the optimism was false.

By 1959 most London trains terminated at King's Lynn (they all did by 1966). And no trains at all ran north of Lynn after 1969. The long, slow decline of the Fen Line itself had already begun, following its non inclusion in the routes selected for development by BR in 1965.

Admittedly, new ways of funding loss making services kept the line on oxygen support. However, the reorganisation of BR into commercial sectors in 1982 saw the line north of Cambridge excluded from the vital London & South East Sector and that dashed hopes of any investment.

This was largely in line with other thinking. The previous year had seen the Department of Transport/BR *Review of Main Line Electrification* putting forward options for wiring parts of the network. This acknowledged the case for extending electrification to Cambridge, both from Royston and from Bishops Stortford.

And, under the most favourable outlook, there was, *Main Line Electrification* said, even a case for wiring beyond Cambridge to Ely, albeit then on to *Peterborough*.

Quite correctly, we have made no mention of **Beeching**. Instead, there's another name to remember - **Serpell**, whose report *Review of Railway Finances* of 1983 set out a range of options to staunch government spending. And that most certainly didn't mean electrification. Closure, more like.

True, **Serpell** did see some value in keeping lines south of Cambridge open, though he also established that if you really wanted the railway to stand on its own two feet, there should be *no* lines in East Anglia, except for London-Norwich and London-Peterborough-the North.

Yes, that's right. No rail routes to Cambridge at all.

The double track was singled between Littleport and Downham on 17 June 1984 and between Magdalen Road (Watlington) and King's Lynn on 10 February 1985.

To facilitate electrification? More like the last act before final curtains.

So things weren't happy when a King's Lynn meeting set up FLUA on Saturday 23 November 1985.

But everything was to change, drastically. The line was to be included in the South East after all; *Network SouthEast* was formed on 10 June 1986 - we'd like to claim it was our influence, but it most certainly wasn't! - with Lynn at its northernmost extent.

Enter a man with a vision, NSE chief Chris Green: "Let's talk electrification!"

Blow by blow

EVEN SO, the early years were about fighting for a realistic timetable. Getting trains to stop officially at Waterbeach, getting an early morning connection from King's Lynn into London services at Cambridge, and getting that investment put into the line, were early themes.

Journey times were heroic – 1hour 57 minutes for one Liverpool Street to Ely train and 2hrs 15 minutes between Lynn and London – and FLUA was not amused. Fortunately media contacts were good and it wasn't too long before the whole country was hearing about it!

"Abysmal, deplorable and useless" commented the FLUA *Newsletter* of June 1987. It was considering the timetable introduced in May.

"Perhaps the grossest example is that we now have passengers leaving Ely at 06.43 hrs to ensure they can be at a meeting in London at 09.30 hrs, simply because the management of BR cannot adhere to their own timetables," remarked the *Newsletter*.

A year later, things were on the up. "**Theo Steel** and **Trevor Hill** have planned major improvements for the King's Lynn service from May [1988], mainly, I am sure," said Chairman, **Rodney Collins**, "due to the efforts of FLUA." It was the best timetable for over a decade.

The emphasis changed to getting more people on the trains – and to join FLUA! Husband and wife team **Stuart** and **Gerry Todd**, Secretary and Treasurer respectively, were after people's money – they continually stressed what good value FLUA membership [then at £2.50] was!

Charles Devereux and **David Rooks** were now the relevant rail managers, looking after what had now become "Network Expresses," some electrically hauled south of Cambridge and some diesel-hauled throughout. FLUA scored again with a successful plea for additional trains between Lynn and Cambridge on Saturdays.

The October/November 1988 *Newsletter* reported **Charles Devereux** telling the AGM that electrification to Kings Lynn now "looked

highly likely." In a new twist, **Rodney Collins** stressed that FLUA would be pressing for privatisation "unless improvements were made in the management of train catering services."

The special *Newsletter* of 21 February 1989 reported that the electrification announcement was "the best possible news" but there was new concern that the coaching stock would be replaced by electric units. "It would mean losing our two by two seating, tables, hot buffets and telephones." That was one we lost!

Later that year, the *Newsletter* stressed "One important point – we want BR to start electrifying from the King's Lynn end first, in case cut-backs force any re-thinks at a later date!"

From Monday 1 October 1989 buses replaced most trains to facilitate electrification works during daylight hours (a very necessary economy). Peak time diesel units were drafted in to shuttle between Lynn and Cambridge. "It has been quite obvious that the rolling stock sent to replace the loco-hauled sets were anything but refurbished," rebuked the Summer 1990 *Newsletter*. "Get it in writing or forget it!" Downhill from there: in Autumn 1991 "the Association totally rejected the draft timetable produced by British Rail for the electric services now due to come into effect at the end of August this year."

By Spring 1992 the *Newsletter* was able to say, "We have now received a further draft which is certainly better than the original." It continued, "The first service from King's Lynn on weekdays will depart at 05.38, giving an arrival time at Liverpool Street at 07.40."

"The last train from King's Lynn will leave at 22.30, reaching London at 00.20. This will be the first time in history that one could travel from King's Lynn so late at night."

But the last departure from King's Cross was too early, at 21.15 (an hour later for Ely). "It was our hope that we could get a service at 23.15 from King's Cross to King's Lynn and we will continue to press."

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1993 - another year, another problem. "We have negotiated several improvements..." but "the 08.04 departure from King's Lynn to King's Cross has had the stops at Watlington, Littleport and Waterbeach deleted. As this is the first train to London that passengers can use the cheap day return tickets, we feel that British Rail has made the wrong decision."

"As from August [1994]," reported the *Newsletter*, "the severe overcrowding on the 18.13 from King's Cross was eased with the removal of the Stevenage stop. The same thing will happen on the 18.43 train from King's Cross, from the timetable change."

By that time it was connections that were causing bother – "We have made WAGN well aware of your concerns over the poor connections onto the Fen Line at Cambridge. They have assured us that they will do all they can to ensure that these will be held whenever possible."

Station Reports were a new feature in the *Newsletter* from October 1995, though the big news was the impending introduction of the Networker class 365 trains – "there is a small amount of remedial work to platform edges and camera adjustments to be done...."

"One good bit of news that we have been campaigning for is that the 18.13 from King's Cross to King's Lynn will become an 8-car set [from June 1996]" announced the *Newsletter*. The bad news was that the unofficial car park at Waterbeach was to close.

By February 1997 the *Newsletter* had this to say: "The new timetable effective from June 1997 will reflect faster journey times and the timetable, after many years of little change [!], will be quite radically altered. The main change being that all trains will call at all Fen Line stations with a couple of exceptions."

And by the Autumn it was time to set out what we had done. In the list of achievements were permitted use of Network Cards before 10.00, CCTV at King's Lynn, our suggestion (taken up) for through bus tickets to Cambridge city centre and our request for an 06.59 Ely 'starter' to King's Cross.

Cycles were the issue in Spring 1998: "we sympathise with the predicament WAGN are faced with, we would not wish to see any cyclist penalised."

The very last *Newsletter*, Summer 1998, was jubilant. "The 16.45, 17.45 and 18.45 trains from King's Cross will see the times on to King's Lynn from Cambridge *improved* by 2, 11 and 5 minutes respectively. This is excellent news for the majority who use these *through* services. It will, however, mean a complete loss of the Liverpool Street connections at Cambridge...."

New! Read all about it! *The Fenman* was in business from Autumn 1998. "We have highlighted three priorities for improvement" ... a morning King's Cross arrival from Lynn about 08.15, an afternoon departure from Cambridge about 17.15 to relieve the overcrowding on the 17.38 and an extension of the 23.15 from King's Cross through to Lynn.

***The Fenman* also commented on the new car park at Waterbeach and underlined the growing parking problems at Downham Market and Watlington.**

From 11 January 1999 there was a new 17.27 train from Cambridge to Waterbeach and Ely. "We are delighted at this result," said *The Fenman*, stressing that we saw it as a first step to a better service for Cambridge workers returning home to *all* Fen Line stations.

"At long last, the late train is to run to Lynn" reported *The Fenman*; the new service would run on Fridays and Saturdays from 4 June 1999.

The Cambridge-Royston blockade in the summer of that year was bearable as it promised faster journeys. "In 1992, when the electrics started, trains stopping at all Fen Line stations took 107 minutes between Kings Cross and Kings Lynn. Now they take 94..." *To be continued...*

Appreciation

Without you, our members, FLUA would be nothing. We hope you enjoy this retrospective issue as a token of our thanks for your support.